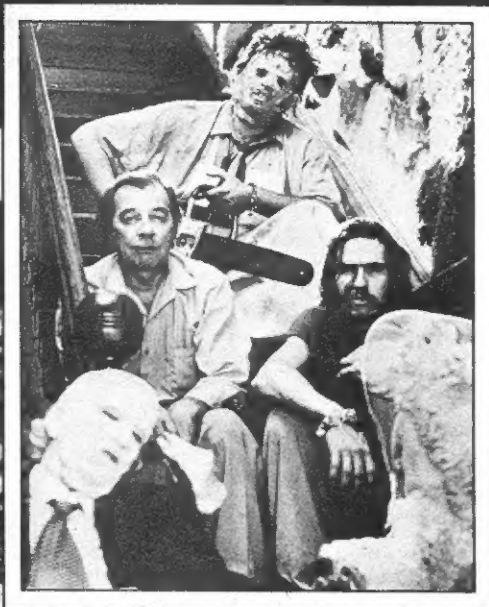




# THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE



Previous page: Gunnar Hansen as "Leatherface." Above: Teri McMinn (as Pam) in a litter of dismembered horrors. Right: part of the cast gathered together for a sentimental "family" group shot — a real bunch of jovial cut-ups who believe in keeping their noses close to the grindstone.

**THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE** is one more step up the rung of excruciating filmic horror, with the accent on bludgeoning, terrifying "FearOrama" calculated to try and make you fall out of your theater seat. "God, help us all! When will all this violence, horror and killing end?" voiced an impressionable member of the audience. "NEVER, I hope!" rebutted the house's manager, gloating over his boxoffice profits.

Whatever you do, you are hereby cautioned not to see **THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE**—otherwise, you should proceed "at your own risk," as some of the early horror film blurbs used to say. Not that it's a failure; indeed, it succeeds too well at what it sets out to do. This movie extends the boundaries of cinematic terror and revulsion to the point where we are now forced to redefine the term "horror film."

I consider myself a hardened observer of horror films, yet this one reduced me to a pale and quivering hulk. We can cluck our tongue all we want about sadism, violence, exploitation; yet we can't deny it takes talent to make a film so frightening that it practically has us peeing in our pants. We can wag a finger at the hammy acting so common to these shockers of the raw-head-and-bloody-bones variety. We can shake our heads in disbelief at the ads and prologue which claim that the plot is based on an actual incident. While they unfold, however, we are com-

pled to believe that the disgusting events on-screen are really taking place. We give the tale our credence to the same extent that we believe a nightmare while we're asleep. In light of its accomplishments, this monster-piece can be called neither tacky nor sloppy.

This production was perpetrated by a group of Texas film students who apparently saw **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD** and duly absorbed its contents. Considering the subject matter, **MASSACRE** is not gratuitously gory, yet it never fails to convey the physical impact of the savage crimes it portrays.

There's no shortage of suspenseful atmospherics, either. The film begins with a quintet of young people driving happily down a road. Ignore the sun-drenched scenery they pass, however fetchingly it is photographed; the steady counterpoint of baleful news bulletins on the car radio assures us that something dire will fall these kids, and soon. They stop at a gas station; even the soapsuds are made to look sinister as the attendant washes their windshield. Next they visit an old abandoned homestead. We're certain that this grim habitation isn't as deserted as it looks. Of course, the director has duped us: that dilapidated dwelling is probably the safest place. Nearby, however, is a clean-looking farmhouse, all white-washed and with a porch swing out front—this turns out to be the headquarters of a latterday Sawney Bean. The inhabitants are all slaughterhouse employees who've failed to grasp the distinction that what may be permissible with cattle isn't generally practiced upon people. One of their hapless victims stumbles upon a chamber so

littered with human bones that we might feel inclined to laugh at the overdone gruesomeness of it all. Suspended from the ceiling, however, is a live chicken, squawking and fluttering in a bird cage too small to accommodate it; this loony, incongruous detail supplies precisely the right touch of genuine mortal madness to convince us that what we see is not ridiculous, but all too real. There are other flashes of directorial brilliance: a dense growth of bushes, for example, hinders the heroine's panic-stricken flight, but, owing to the weapon of the title, poses no impediment to the progress of her crazed pursuer (Gunnar Hansen). As the girl in distress (to put it mildly), Marilyn Burns is faced with a most strenuous role which requires her to maintain her portrayal of fever-pitched hysteria through the greater part of the film. Hansen's near-supernatural menace is enhanced by a leather mask which he never once removes. It may be an old trick, but it still scares.

There is now no doubt that the advent of films like **NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD** and **THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE**—with their no-holds-barred approach to terror (and their roots in **PSYCHO**)—signifies what I think is the emergence of a new school of horror cinema in America. This is not entirely a bad thing, for we can no longer depend upon horror thrillers in the classic tradition to frighten or satisfy us. The distorted cardboard sets of German expressionism, the turbulent shadowland of vintage Universal, the voluptuous heroines of Hammer, and the cultivated styliness of the Corman Poe pics have become overly familiar, if not almost cliché. To the general public these are

the earmarks of "horror movies." However, to the dedicated reader of CoF, these same elements constitute, leave us face it, a richly romantic source of cinematic beauty. Though it may give us a twinge now and then, the traditional horror film is not terrifying; it is pleasantly scary. In its purest form this classic tradition logically culminates in the ladies' Gothic romance, where fear is eliminated and we are left with the beautiful, sinister accoutrements, washed clean of offending excitement.

The new horror movie is gorier than the old, but this is not its distinguishing characteristic. More decisive is a change in emphasis which is reflected in the acting, direction and photography. Illustrating this difference is an example from *THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE*: a girl's finger is cut, then jammed into the mouth of a seemingly dead old man, who promptly awakens and sucks contentedly, an obscene travesty of a babe at its mother's breast. Now, what precisely are we shown in this scene? A cut finger. Nothing gory about that. We see that every time we have a blood test. We're also shown someone sucking the blood from the finger. We've seen that before, too. Conceivably, a Roger Corman or a Terence Fisher could stage this sequence in a manner decadent and erotic. In *MASSACRE*, however, it strikes a repulsive chord which is profoundly disturbing; it positively traumatizes the moviegoer, leaving him groggy on the ropes. We have reached the

polar opposite of the ladies' Gothic; the beauty of the classic form has been drained away and only terror is left. The esthetic of the new horror film is the absence of any esthetic whatever. Some may deplore this. It may be argued, however, that it is more moral to portray violent death in all its horror rather than make it look stylized and pretty or, worse yet, funny.

How important are direction and photography to *MASSACRE*'s effectiveness? These are, after all, the components by which the movie holds us in its thrall. They mean everything to it, and yet in the final analysis they mean nothing, just as the film itself ranks among both the best and the worst of the year. All that truly counts is the brutal, sickening, helpless terror we feel. And how is a critic to go about criticising that?

— Paul Roen —

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Allegedly based on a true "crime" case, *TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE* is a gruesome tale of five young people who meet a grisly end at the hands of crazed madmen in an old deserted house. Full credit goes to Tobe Hooper who directed and co-scripted this truly frightening film. Though not quite as gruesome as *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD*, it's far more stylish and elaborate. TCM's and NOTLD's dramatic styles are rather similar: amateurish and practically nonexistent, except for TCM's femme lead, Mari-

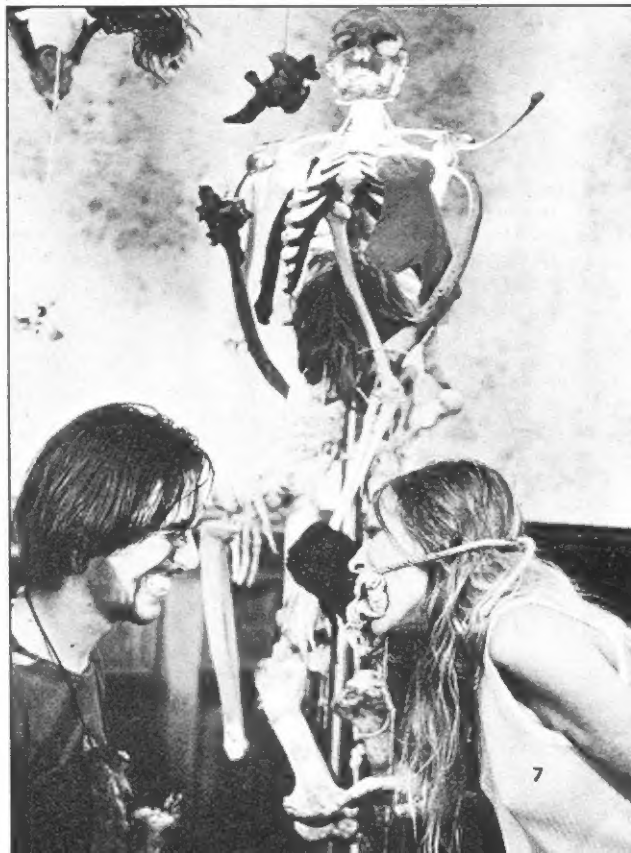
lyn Burns—though apparently her first film, she's excellent on all counts and miles ahead in acting compared with Judith O'Dea, as well as being extremely attractive and sexually stimulating. Consequently, it's quite unnerving to watch her deteriorate from a beautiful, innocent girl at the film's onset into a hysterical, blood-soaked mess at the conclusion.

Director Hooper knows how to shake up his audience. Each time one of the kids approaches the front door to the evil house, one experiences the same menacing dread felt while watching *THE EXORCIST*, especially during Regan's bedroom sequences. You just *knew* something terrible was about to happen. And much to our delight, something did!

In TCM one of the boys is clubbed to death; one girl is hung on a meat hook, etc. Finally, no one is left alive except Miss Burns; and now—ready for the big scene:

With his chainsaw going full blast, the madman with the leather mask chases Miss Burns through the bog in what may be one of the most suspenseful sequences in film history. He runs, then gets close to her, but not near enough, though she's within inches of his reach. Herewith, the frenetic, fantastic pacing and terrific camerawork (Daniel Pearl) puts you right in the center of the action; you actually feel it's all happening... to you—or, at least, that you're right there in those woods, watching it all happen. And, it *works*, because both times I saw the film the audience threw

Left: Gunnar Hansen (Leatherface) giving Teri McMinn her final "treatment." Right: Edwin Neal, a regular S&M freak, is regaling Marilyn Burns about the salubrious qualities of a quaint Chainsaw environment.





Left: Gunnar Hansen on the warpath after his fleeing victim (right), Marilyn Burns who, quivering in terror, attempts to escape a horrible fate by hiding in the woods by night.



its "super-coolness" to the wind and reacted by screaming "Run... Run... Run!" to the fleeing heroine. Miss Burns is so believable and perfect, everyone wants desperately to help her.

Not all of the film is as perfect since some of the actors speak in heavy provincial draws that make their lines often unclear or impossible to comprehend. There are also moments of embarrassingly overdone hamminess—the madmen get a little out of hand by chewing up the scenery to shreds, raving, hollering, ranting and screaming like there was no tomorrow; but in spite of several such protracted scenes, you find yourself wondering if this wasn't the way it really was. The film's basic "terror" gets to be all the more gripping when you remind yourself that this is supposed to be based on actual fact... that it did—God, help us!—happen.

Just as NOTLD became a cult favorite, TCM bears all the elements of being the new heir apparent to the Throne of Grue-Shock-croo... Ironically, proving once again what humanity has been aware of in this Water-gate Era: the most horrible monster of all is, at times, man himself.

— Richard Buomano —

#### THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE

##### Cast & Credits:

Marilyn Burns, Allen Danziger, Paul Partain, William Vail, Teri McMinn, Edwin Neal, Jim Siedow, Gunnar Hansen, John Dugan, Jerry Lorenz.  
Exec.prod.: Jay Parsley. Prod. & dir.: Tobe Hooper. Story/screenplay: Kim Henkel, Tobe Hooper. Cinematography: Dan Pearl. Art dir.: Robert Burns. Makeup: Dorothy Pearl, W.E. Barnes. Editors: Sallye Richardson, Larry Carol. Music score: Tobe Hooper, Wayne Bell.